

The  
*RADIANT*  
Midnight

MELISSA MAIMONE



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## **The Radiant Midnight**

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# FOREWORD

CURT THOMPSON, MD

The first time I heard Melissa Maimone speak publicly about her story of affliction, I was immediately captivated. She spoke with authority—as one who *authors*. As one who was offering something that was emerging from the center of her soul, not something she had read about on the Internet. She spoke not as one who was talking from a distance about some *thing*, but rather as one bearing faithful witness to her journey—true to its complete nature of joy and heartache, beauty and anguish, light and darkness. She told of her experience of depression not as something apart from herself, but rather as an integral element of her life—threads that God was patiently weaving into a tapestry of such elegance and refinement that one could not help but be drawn into it. At its deepest level, her story was my own. I am confident that in *The Radiant Midnight* you will find your own as well.

For nearly 30 years I have practiced as a psychiatrist. My most important calling is to walk with people into places in their stories that they have not yet traveled. Their reluctance to have traversed these paths—whether consciously or not—has led them to any number of painful realities that have them on the brink. They are usually attempting to regulate states of depression, anxiety, substance (or other) addictions, broken relationships of all kinds, and

any number of other emotional and behavioral maladies. At the heart of their troubles lie, among other things, their inexperience at telling their stories fully in all of their agonizing, shaming, beautiful grandeur. They have not the words to say—or the person to *hear* them say—that which is truest about who they are and what they are enduring.

This deeply entrenched reality—our inability to tell the truth about who we are—is as old as humanity. In our present day, this has led to an avalanche of mental health needs as the increase in rates of depression, anxiety, addiction, and suicide show no signs of relenting.

As a neuroscientist who speaks frequently about research discoveries relating to the interplay between the brain and relationships, you would think I would be the supreme optimist. And indeed, I am grateful for and hopeful about what we are learning about rewiring our minds. But it is not enough for us to have more new information in the information age. Rather, we need embodied evidence that our lives can change, that our minds can be renewed, and that joy can be known—not just as a *result of* but even *in the face of* darkness. We don't just need better stories; we need truer stories. Stories that tell of a God who meets us in order to save us and extend the boundaries of our imaginations beyond the horizons we can see. I mostly *want* a God who will transform my darkness while leaving me alone and not asking me to change that much. But it turns out that far more often what I *need*—and what I get—is a God who transforms me *through* that darkness. Unfortunately, we suffer from a dearth of stories telling us that this is how God frequently works.

Into this breach—this chasm that lies between the God of our midnights and our belief that there should be no such darkness at all—steps our author. And she knows of what she speaks. She speaks of the gifts of surrender and suffering; of time and silence;

of community, courage, and hope. There is the invitation to solitude where God can find us in all of our shameful, glorious, broken, beautiful selves. For her, midnight is not something that is primarily to be escaped; it is that which God is using to—often to my utter incomprehension and resistance—love us.

And as she writes, our author does not flinch. She denies not one square inch of painful terrain that we all must cover if we are the least bit serious about following Jesus. But Melissa rightly reflects that this suffering—this midnight—is the very thing that God is using to transform us into creatures we will barely recognize once the process is complete. She covers this ground so effectively that by the time you have read the final page you will have few questions about how the gifts about which she speaks are indeed that—gifts.

But there is something more. In *The Radiant Midnight* you will find not merely abstract ideas about the essence of darkness or how to go about facing it. You will also find humor. Wisdom. Honesty. You will find Melissa's very bone and blood. You will find a style of writing that draws you into the text because it is the sound of Melissa's voice. A voice of kindness and grace. A voice of relentless and comprehensive transparency. A voice that speaks not just *to* you but *for* you, the reader, the things you have felt and sensed and known to be true but have not yet found the words or the way. She can do this because she is herself immersed in the very work she invites you to join her in doing. She is no stranger to anything about which she speaks. She will not ask you to do something she herself has not been willing to pay the price for.

And it is here, then, in reading—rather, perhaps, listening to—her words, that your heart, trapped as it may feel in its own midnight, begins to see the first signs of dawn. Light that is not an indication that your affliction is summarily resolved, but that confidently assures you that in your darkness, God does not, will not,

leave you alone, but is truly in the business of revealing His works and your glory in the depth of your travail. This, my fellow traveler, is something that often requires great patience but is God's way of disclosing what it means to practice for His new heaven and earth that are surely coming.

And so, I commend this book to you and to anyone you know who, having read it, will be as grateful as I am that Melissa has written it. Grateful for a God who in the depth of our midnights sees only radiance. And will stop at nothing until we not only see the same but have become that very thing.

**Curt Thompson, MD**

Author of *Anatomy of the Soul* and *The Soul of Shame*

# INTRODUCTION

*Night, do your gentle work; in you I put my trust.*

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER<sup>1</sup>

It was 1999 when the darkness descended again. I was a happily married wife and mother of two, surrounded by wonderful friends and a good church. I had a strong foundation of faith. There was no reasonable explanation for the dread I felt upon waking every morning and the sense of isolation and despair that edged its way into my increasingly scattered thoughts. I couldn't seem to pull it together, no matter how hard I tried. In desperation, I sought out a Christian counselor with the hope that he could talk me out of my unmitigated sadness.

I slumped into his chair, tissues in hand, tears rolling down my face, apologetically explaining that I was falling apart without any earthly reason to do so. I exclaimed, "I believe in Jesus. Everything changed when I gave my life to Him! I love Him! I love my life! So what is wrong with me?" After questioning me about my physical health, my daily routines, and my energy level, my new therapist suggested perhaps I was suffering from depression. Furthermore, he recommended medication. "Have you been diagnosed with depression before?" he asked gently. I hung my head in shame. "Yes," I whispered.

I had been a Christian for about four years when that conversation with my counselor took place. It was the first time I experienced



the darkness of depression after becoming a believer in Jesus Christ. It would not be the last. I've battled anxiety and depression for most of my life. It has come and gone through the years, but like cobwebs that show up in the corners of my house, the darkness always returns. Though I've given my life to Christ, the peace of God that surpasses understanding (Philippians 4:7) can elude me. Though I work in ministry, I often cannot minister to my own soul. Though I turn to the Bible regularly, the words do not penetrate the sorrow that can live bone-deep inside of me. My marriage is satisfying, my friendships dear, my children healthy, and yet none of these relationships completely alleviates my loneliness.

I hated being depressed. I fought it. I felt deep shame about it. This formidable presence bullied every area of my life. Depression pushed around my marriage. It undermined my passion for the church. It chipped away at my faith. Its presence in my life made absolutely no sense. How could I serve God's people when I was afraid to talk to them? How could I lead when I was overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy and doubt? How was I to be strong when I felt so fragile? How could I take proper care of my children when I could barely get out of bed? If I was called to be a light in this world, why was I helpless to shake the darkness in my own heart?

In my appeals to the Lord, I made dramatic courtroom arguments. I told Him how impractical it all was. I told Him He was making a huge mistake. I explained how granting my request for relief would be beneficial for both of us. I flailed my arms around and used impressive, fabulous words in order to convince Him to take the depression and sadness away. I *rocked* those arguments. Even so, God didn't budge.

In a letter to the Corinthian church, the apostle Paul explores his own deep pain. In many Bible translations, it's referred to as a "thorn" in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7) But in the original Greek,

the word Paul uses for “thorn” is *skolops*, which more literally translated means stake<sup>2</sup>; like the kind you drive into the ground or those guys in the movies use to kill vampires. His impairment was more than a slight prick of the finger. Paul was stabbed by it. He was debilitated because of it, and he asked God to take it away three times. In response to Paul’s courtroom arguments God replied, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). In other words, the answer is, “No, I will not take it away. I’ve got this and you’ve got Me. That is enough.” Like Paul, I asked the God I love and trust to take away this painful stake buried deep in my flesh. And like Paul, the Lord responded with a loving but firm, “No. You’ve got Me. I will be enough for you.”

I believe with all my being that God can heal me, which makes the no all the more painful. I’ve wondered if God is holding out on me. Like a teasing adult waving a piece of candy above a child’s head, my desire is within sight but out of reach. Yet I also believe we have a God whose love is so high, so wide, and so deep we couldn’t see its edges if looking through the Hubble Space Telescope. Out of these beliefs—and really, if I am honest, out of sheer exhaustion—I took a radical step: I stopped fighting the darkness. I decided that if my depression has been permitted by the God who loves me completely, then perhaps my focus on removing it distracts me from why He left it there in the first place.

For the first time, I looked at my stake closely. I bent down and turned my head to study it. I tried to see it from all angles, but because it’s a part of me, I have only partial perspective. Nevertheless, over the years I’ve poked and prodded and run my fingers along its rough edges and smooth indentations. Because I’m less afraid of the splintery darkness that takes over my heart and mind, I’m more comfortable contemplating its purpose. And here’s what I’ve come to believe: My afflictions are not God’s punishment or cruel

game. He is not oblivious or inattentive to my suffering. The stake planted in my flesh is allowed to remain there because God offers His grace instead. He knows my soul needs it more than healing, even when I would argue otherwise. My deepest wounds are invitations to explore the aspects of God that scare me most: His power, His holiness, and His ways, which are so unlike mine. Through my explorations, among my questions and rants and tears, my perspective on the broken places in my soul has changed. I've come to believe the darkness has more to offer than just pain.

No one gets through this life unscathed by suffering, loss, or heartache. You probably have issues that recur just when you are sure you've finally moved past them. Like a thorn (or stake) that refuses to budge from your side, some days (or months or years) these issues ache and at other times lie dormant. Either way, they never quite disappear. Perhaps it's grief. Maybe it's a difficult marriage. It could be an eating disorder or an addiction or even a crisis of faith. Maybe, like me, you struggle with depression. It might not be anything that requires a diagnosis or is even tangible enough to describe. Whatever the details of your story, you've ended up here in the dark. You've found yourself in unfamiliar surroundings, without direction, without light, without an exit. You stretch out your hands and grope around in desperation; all you know for sure is that you want out of this murky, awful place.

Avoiding pain and wanting relief as soon as possible is only natural. It might feel like this place of darkness is yours alone to experience because you can't see anyone (or anything) else. Sometimes you can't hear anything either, because when we are afraid and want to escape, most of us thrash around quite a bit. With all the panicked crashing and banging and blind desperation, we miss the goodness the dark places have to offer.

But if you quiet your soul just a bit and rest your body for a while,

I believe you will hear the voice of the One who loves you most. He is the One who sings songs of love over you. He is the One who has invited you to a life that relies on more than sight or circumstance. And I believe with all my heart this darkness allowed by God is an invitation to those He dearly loves to discover His powerful grace in unexpected places.

Through trial and error, panic and faith, tears and blessing, I've begun to understand how to rest in the darkness. I've learned to embrace the things I wanted God to remove most. It has not always been a pretty sight, but it's happened. I've spent some time here, and my eyes have adjusted to the darkness a bit, so grab my hand and we can go together. Let's explore this uncomfortable place where we don't want to be. We will go slowly, because if we run in the dark, we will bump our shins and scrape our knees. It's easy to trip and fall when you can't see what's in front of you. I've got the scars to prove it.

In the course of this book, we will walk step by step into this journey of surrender, suffering, rest, and restoration. We will explore shadowy places, but we will not be alone. Jesus Christ, the lover of our soul and the lifter of our head, will be there too. And in the silence of Midnight, when eyes no longer see and ears are attuned, we will discover God's gifts in the dark places.